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COMMONWEAL

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To the Editors

Second sight

Thanks so much for placing the original "Smile, When You Say 'Laity'" [September 12] on your website so that I could take a second look at the basis for all those reactions in the issue of November 21. You folks with your "perfect *Commonweal* articles" were among my reasons for saying thanks this Thanksgiving.

(MOST REV.) RICHARD J. SKLBA
Milwaukee, Wis.

The writer is auxiliary bishop of the Milwaukee archdiocese.

Wrong on Father Ray

Peter Feuerherd cites as one reason he likes "Nothing Sacred" that Father Ray is "prolife" [November 21]. He's wrong, flat-out wrong. This is not a matter of interpretation, it's there for all who have eyes that can see. In the chancery, Father Ray explicitly says that he cannot do (advise against abortion) what he himself does not believe. Indeed, the ABC website says of the infamous abortion discussion, "In the confessional, Ray ignores church policy." What more evidence can there be?

I'm also sorry to tell Pete that Father Ray can, in fact, lie. Remember the scene outside the woman's door where he says he's reading something to her, and the camera shows he has a blank piece of paper in front of him? That doesn't make him a bad guy, but it does shoot a hole in Pete's reasoning.

But we do agree on one thing: Both of us share Ray's preference for Frank Sinatra.

WILLIAM A. DONOHUE
New York, N.Y.

The writer is president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

The writer replies:

On Dr. Donohue's first point, I would cite episode number 4, during which the entire parish staff, including Father Ray, does its utmost to prevent a teenage girl from having an abortion. I would give the show's producers some credit for depicting Father Ray's growth in wisdom and fidelity to church teaching in this regard. Dr. Donohue's reference to the ABC website is irrelevant: How the network may have hyped "Nothing Sacred" has little to do with the actual episodes.

On his second point: All I can say is that Dr. Donohue is a more faithful viewer of "Nothing Sacred" than I am. Regrettably, I never saw the episode he describes and was unable to enlist the aid of my fifteen-year-old—he's a "Friends" fan. But I'm working on his moral development.

PETER FEUERHERD

Right on 'Sacred'

Thanks very much for your editorial [October 24] and articles [October 10, November 21] on ABC's "Nothing Sacred." I agree that this is about the best depiction of the modern (especially urban) Catholic church we're going to see in the media, and that it deserves to stay on the tube. If you send copies of your materials to the network and the show's producers, it may encourage them to keep fighting the good fight, and to see that we're not all in the mold of the Catholic League. I hope they understand that.

Keep up the great work; I enjoy the magazine more with every issue.

JOYCE BIBZAK
Park Forest, Ill.

Uses of atheism

The answer to D.D. Hook's question [Correspondence, November 7], about what purpose an atheist accountant serves in the television series "Nothing Sacred," was provided in the script, quoted in the *New York Times* (September 18). Asked at a staff meeting "why we have an atheist on staff," the pastor replies: "I don't want a business manager who thinks that God will provide."

Maybe financial acumen was the reason his bishop chose him as pastor—which otherwise is something of a mystery. (A character out of Greene, Bernanos, or O'Connor, he's not.) Father Ray may be a relic of the '60s, but for dealing responsibly with parish resources, he's right on. Recall the commendation, in Luke's Gospel, of the children of this world for being wiser in their generation than the children of light.

ALFRED CAVANAUGH
Kenwood, Calif.

The church & the academy

In "The Vatican, the Bishops, the Academy" [September 26], Paul C.

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Saunders missed the point of canon 810 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. It did not say, as he asserts, that "it was the responsibility of the competent ecclesiastical authority to 'provide for the appointment of teachers...outstanding in their integrity of doctrine and probity of life'"; on the contrary, the canon entrusted that responsibility to "the authority who is competent in accord with the statutes" (canon 810, par. 1), in other words, the *internal* academic authorities of the college or university. In this respect the current Code promotes the principle of subsidiarity by placing the duty where it belongs, unlike the 1917 Code which gave bishops the right to make professorial appointments themselves.

Nor do the bishop's "right and duty of being vigilant that in these universities the principles of Catholic doctrine are faithfully observed" (canon 810, par. 2) give him unrestricted license, as some observers seem to fear, to micromanage academic institutions, a role no wise bishop would want. The law simply affirms his undisputed competence to safeguard the church against dangers to faith and morals. He can do so most effectively through the proper exercise of his teaching office and through the influence that his moral authority has over Catholic believers and their institutions.

The apostolic constitution *Ex corde ecclesiae* does not depart from the honored medieval tradition of the rightful autonomy of universities within the church. But that is just the point: Catholic universities are *within* the church, indeed, at its very heart. The Code, the Holy See, and the American bishops, I suspect, are asking for little more and nothing less.

JAMES J. CONN, S.J.
Baltimore, Md.

The writer is dean and professor of canon law at Saint Mary's Seminary and University.

The author replies:

I cited canon 810, enacted in 1983, as further evidence of the consistency of the belief on the part of the church's central authority that it should control Catholic colleges and universities. I take Professor Conn's point that the phrase "the authority who is competent in accord with the statutes" most likely refers to the "internal academic authorities of the college or university," even though that description does not appear in the canon.

Nevertheless, canon 810 does give further evidence of Rome's belief that the hierarchy should control Catholic universities, despite their desire for institutional autonomy. The second paragraph of the canon makes that very point directly: "The conference of bishops and the diocesan bishops concerned have the right and duty of being vigilant that in these universities the principles of Catholic doctrine are faithfully observed." There can be no doubt whatsoever that this paragraph refers to ecclesiastical, not internal academic, authority.

There can also be no doubt that this paragraph was intended to confer broad authority on the local bishop and the bishops' conferences over Catholic universities. Indeed, Professor Conn has elsewhere written [*Catholic Universities in the United States and Ecclesiastical Authority*, Analecta Gregoriana, Rome, 1991] that canon 810 "opens the door to *extensive involvement* on the part of ecclesiastical authority by highlighting its role of vigilance that 'the principles of Catholic doctrine be faithfully observed'" [emphasis mine]. Nor is the bishop's authority limited only to matters involving the teaching of Catholic theology. According to Professor Conn, "the object of ecclesiastical authority's vigilance [required by canon 810] should not be limited to theology and related disciplines.... Ecclesiastical authority is to see that the 'principles of Catholic doctrine are faithfully observed,' a more extensive duty than that of caring that 'Catholic doctrine be faithfully taught,' which seems restricted to the classroom context."

Professor Conn has also written that "it is probably true to say that a pattern of direct hierarchical involvement in Catholic university life is likely to render such institutions suspect and unattractive to talented scholars and, consequently, to talented students. On the other hand, the church has the right, upheld by American law, to determine what a Catholic university is....While a Catholic university must be a university, it must also be Catholic, and it cannot claim to be so if it excludes on principle any legitimate role for the hierarchy to play."

It is perhaps incidental that in his reference to "American law" Professor Conn was referring to the Curran case, and that the decision in that case

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Fleeing Bethlehem

True or false: The Christian church in the Holy Land is dying? *False*, if you mean by "church" the throngs of Christian pilgrims and tourists who visit the holy sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Galilee each year. They account for a substantial portion of tourism in Israel, and their numbers will increase as we move toward the millennium. But *true* if by "church" you mean the living, faith-constituted indigenous community of Christians (under a historic and dazzling variety of rites and denominations, including Armenian, Coptic, Latin, Orthodox, Protestant, Syrian, etc.) in the holy places: those who call the land home and are linked with 2,000 years of uninterrupted Christian presence there, the mother church of Christianity.

Today, these Christians constitute less than 3 percent of the population of Israel (160,000 people, compared to 1 million Muslims and nearly 5 million Jews). But even this small number is down 25 percent in the last twenty-five years. And why is it that Christians, who constitute 6-7 percent of the 6 million Palestinians worldwide, are only half that in their homeland? As with anything having to do with the Holy Land, the reasons are complex and the history is long.

Christian emigration from Palestine, and from the Middle East and North Africa in general, has been going on for a century. But it has progressively accelerated. Motivated by the gradual loss of Palestinians' property rights in Israel, restrictions on building homes and businesses, the search for a more secure economic future, and the desire for greater freedom, Christian Palestinian migration has become a flood. Specifically, since the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel and its spectacular victory in the 1967 Six Day War, the pressure for emigration has grown more intense.

In 1922, Christian Palestinians constituted more than 50 percent of the population of Jerusalem; today they account for under 2 percent. Six miles down the road in Bethlehem, it is the same story: a decline from 80 percent to 20 percent. As Michel Sabbah, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, has noted (*Cornerstone*, Autumn 1997), while economic and cultural factors have always played a part in Christian migration from the Holy Land, they have been decisively augmented by recent political pressures. Referring to the near-demise of the Oslo Accords under the Netanyahu government, Sabbah notes that "when the peace process started there was a slowdown in emigration. But due to a lack of progress in the peace process and to frustration as a result of the deterioration in both the political and economic situations, emigration started picking up."

Following the suicide bombings by Palestinian terrorists in Israel in 1996 and 1997, Israeli authorities reacted swiftly and firmly. They cut off Palestinian access, not only to Israel itself but internally to much of the West Bank and Gaza. Israel's security concerns are real and its reaction to terrorist attacks understandable, if often counterproductive. A staggering 50 percent of Palestinians lost their jobs, at least temporarily, and 50,000 foreign workers were brought in to replace them. Palestinians were also prevented from visiting their relatives and from praying at their holy shrines. Added to these hardships, the Israeli government began revoking longstanding residency permits of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, stepped

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up the demolition of Palestinian homes there while pursuing a policy of extending Jewish settlements such as Har Homa, and subsidized the housing of 70,000 Jewish families while providing for only 555 Palestinian families. Whatever gains Israel hopes to make by such policies are offset by the deepening resentment of innocent Palestinians.

Still, why, in terms of percentages, do more *Christians* migrate than their Muslim compatriots, and does it matter?

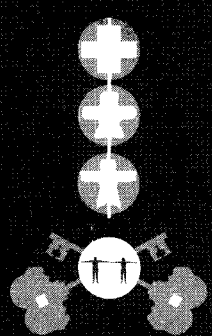
Christians leave at a greater rate because they are better able and prepared to do so. The historical reasons have to do primarily with their educational patrimony. Thanks to a variety of Christian schools and colleges founded in Palestine over the last century, Christians have had greater access to education and to a variety of technical and other marketable skills. These, in turn, have been welcomed abroad. In fact, 92 percent of Palestinian Christians have relatives living outside the Holy Land, who offer a ready landing pad when economic or political calamity strikes.

Obviously, the more that Christians leave, the harder it becomes for the dwindling remnant. Patriarch Sabbah and other Christian leaders have urged their people to remain home, even if it entails considerable personal and familial sacrifice. And to help stem the flow, in 1994 the Franciscans established the nonprofit Holy Land Foundation. Based in Washington, D.C., and Jerusalem, it provides housing, scholarships, and medical care to a small number of Palestinian Christians. So far, 62 apartments have been built in Bethany, with another 132 planned in Bethlehem, Jericho, and Nazareth.

Yet these efforts alone can hardly stem the tide of migration. While they may help convince some Christians to remain, only a substantial change in the political picture is likely to make a difference. And as Pope John Paul reminded Prime Minister Netanyahu this summer, "History, above all in the Holy Land, teaches us that great hopes, if unfulfilled over a long period of time, can cause further unforeseen provocations and uncontrolled situations of violence."

Peaceful political change in the Holy Land must be fostered not only in Israel but from abroad. The marvel of the Holy Land—and its promise—is in the historic variety of its peoples: their living faiths and the potential positive interaction among them. There have been periods when this was the case in the Holy Land. Today, that aim is worth a paramount effort on the part of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It should also be a goal of U.S. foreign policy. For without a living Christian community in the Holy Land, the dream of lasting peace will be seriously diminished in the region. Abandoning the Holy Land would be a grievous loss for the church, but also for Jews and Muslims whose own religious identities are inextricably bound up in a historical and physical relationship to Christians living in the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II



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BAH, HUMBUG

"Be not afraid" may be a papal watchword, but fear is the overriding note of a Vatican instruction on the collaboration of clergy and laity in pastoral ministry signed by the heads of eight curial offices (*Origins*, November 27). The conciliar affirmation of the gifts and responsibilities of all the baptized, on the one hand, and a looming clergy shortage on the other, have produced a flowering of new collaborative ministries and lay roles. Inevitably there has been a reconsideration of distinctions between laity and clergy, in some cases thoughtful and well-founded, in others casual and careless. The Vatican response is to apply strict readings of canon law, slight the great gains in cooperation, and deny the facts on the ground. Only the ordained, for example, are to use titles such as chaplain or coordinator; so much for the large contingent of nuns and lay professionals in prison, hospital, and campus work. Advisory parish councils must have priests presiding at their meetings for decisions to be valid. Lay people may not bless the sick "with the oil of the sick or any other oil"(Crisco?). "The habitual use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion at Mass" should be "avoided" and, where in place, "eliminated." How will the church manage? Clergy absence or an "excessive work load" is no excuse. Instead, the Vatican counsels that bishops exercise "special prudence" in deciding whether priests can retire at age seventy-five. Upon the authors of this document, we bestow the Grinch-who-stole-Christmas award.

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JOHN GARVEY

THE SEVEN McCAUGHEYS

Babies as products

The recent birth of septuplets in Iowa is interesting at a couple of levels. It focuses our attention on the difficult moral questions raised by fertility technology, and the media reactions show just how odd and how callous we have become.

The couple who had the children had used fertility drugs because of their difficulty in conceiving their first child. When their doctors learned that the couple had seven fertilized embryos, the doctors advised "selective reduction"—aborting some, to give the others a better chance. The couple, evangelical Christians, refused. Bless them for that. At this writing the seven babies seem to be doing as well as premature children can do.

I have always had a problem with fertility technologies. Those *in vitro* processes, in which a number of embryos may wind up destroyed in order to produce a viable embryo, waste life. Fertility drugs, which so frequently produce risky multiple births, put those new lives at risk. In both cases, the parents' desire for a child becomes more important than the particular reality of the child; the desire matters more than the flesh.

I say this as someone with two children; we had no trouble with fertility, and knew people who did. I remember especially one friend whose desire for a child was fierce and elemental, who told me I couldn't possibly understand that yearning without having felt it as keenly as she had, and she is certainly right. We wanted children, and they came in the usual way. I could sympathize with her without knowing, in the flesh, her agonized longing for a baby.

But babies are not products. There is something terrifying about the fact that babies are aborted for being the wrong sex (usually female) and something chilling in the "lifeboat" scenario of "selective reduction," where some lives are tossed out to save others. Having a child shouldn't be like picking out the cutest puppy. The understanding of life as a gift, and the realization that parenthood is a form of scary stewardship, not ownership, should lead to respect for the gravity of what it means to accept the responsibility for accepting whatever, *whom*ever, we are given here: a child who might be brilliant, or autistic, or both, as sometimes happens, or—this is so hard for many to accept—no child at all.

We are faced with the possibility (not yet, thank God, realized) of finding genetic markers for traits that used to be seen as random, striking like lightning, so that we can now envision the possibility of eliminating not only the threat of having a female or male child, but also rid ourselves of a homosexual or nonblond or retarded or short or left-handed child. The pursuit of this possibility is not science fiction. Children are already being chosen from sperm banks devoted to the production of the right kind of embryo, where you can shop for children whose race, intellectual ability, or athletic prowess can be yours for the buying.

This is all part of the need for absolute control, which has to do with the terror behind permissive abortion laws and the movement for assisted suicide. If we aren't in charge of our lives, from the very beginning to the very end, who is? We duck that question (forget the *who* stuff) and insist that we ourselves must be in charge of our lives, and no one else may be, and nothing random should be. There is no other "who." In a godless culture, that really isn't a bad answer. In fact, it is the only possible ethical answer, if God is not real.

This is where the current confusion requires those of us who are religious to be annoying to the larger culture. I have good friends who have insisted that those of us who disagree about (for example) abortion should accept the fact that the majority has spoken, through the courts, in favor of permissive abortion laws. The implication is that there is something nearly sacred about the Supreme Court's decision where abortion is concerned—but the death penalty is another issue. There, the courts are simply wrong, and according to this split line of thinking, we must fight them until they change.

But for those of us who believe that the connections among the death penalty, abortion, and assisted suicide are profound, the need to connect them can't be waved away with a few decisions. It is important, though these have not yet become issues in law, for us to see in the fertility technologies a similar moral challenge. Perhaps because they do not so obviously involve the taking of life, we see them as radically different, though they are part of the same culture of control. The child as product, our life as a product, the idea of life itself as something which we must control from beginning to end—it is that, or allow something else into it, and as a society we have no idea what that might be—all of this is desirable because of an inability to accept the dimension of the tragic, the territory in which we must live and over which we can have no final control.

This is one of the problems with living in a secular society, which has a stake in not addressing these deeper questions. Even before we get to the place where Christianity, or Judaism, or Buddhism, or any other serious tradition can address us, you must begin here, where tragedy is, where all of us live and will die, a place which our culture does everything it can to make sure we will never know. □

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Sara Maitland

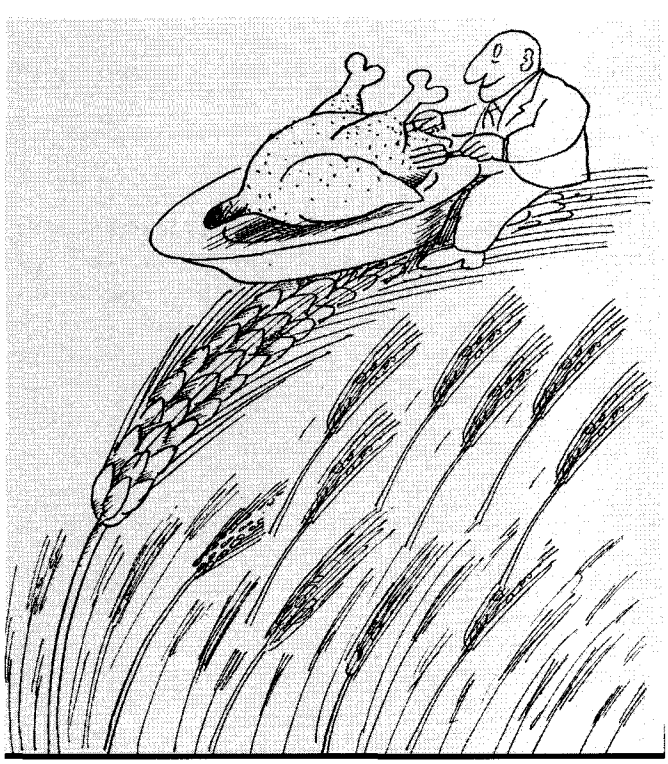
FAST FIRST, THEN FEAST

How God keeps Christmas

We have lost the art of feasting. This is a little sad at Christmas time. We cannot feast, because we do not fast.

I am not, here, bemoaning the passing of the old "disciplines" of meatless Fridays, the from-midnight abstention before Communion, or the rigors of Lent. (No one has taken these away from us anyway; anyone who wants to is entirely free to fast, and many do.) I am talking about a larger social rhythm.

I have never read any comment on the delicate courtesy of the church which imposed fasting as a gift upon her children at exactly the time of year when they would have been hungry anyway. Lent fills in the long season of the year when food in northern agricultural communities was most scarce and least attractive. In the autumn you killed any animals that you did not plan to breed next year—by the second half of the winter, you have either eaten them up or what remains is rancid, weevily, and smoked dry. Your potato heap and your grain store are running low; the rats have been making free with what there is; and you must keep something back for seed. For the church to say, "Now, now is the time we will fast; this lean period is given to us for grace. And the rich, whose cupboards are full, will not be allowed to taunt the poor with their pink cheeks and round bellies,"



is not about body-hatred, it's about making the best we can of what we've got. It is about good manners.

I only recently learned that hens—free-range ones—radically reduce or even cease laying when the weather gets cold. I have read many elaborate allegorical explanations of why eggs became especially associated with Easter. Perhaps it was because they were available; that, simply in and of itself, was something to celebrate. Feast on eggs after fasting from them; paint them bright colors, hand them lavishly to your children—look, we have eggs to eat! Feasting is about excess after hunger.

We of the developed nations live in a society in which silence, or quietness, has become the central symbol of joy, of peace itself. Such a notion would have been incomprehensible, for example, to the Vikings. Their idea of heaven, even after they had become Christian, was of a very noisy and garish place. Peace did not mean quietness, it meant huge drunken hugs instead of huge drunken fights; it meant feeling safe enough to hang up your sword knowing you were going to be among friends. Because out there, waiting at the hall door, were miles and miles and miles of dark, dangerous, and sinisterly quiet forest, miles and miles of salt sea where a ship could founder in the silent night and the foam spray would carry no message home. We yearn for quiet because what we experience is a continuity of din. True feasting is about noisy sociability.

Before electricity, it was dark most of the time, especially in the north. Candles were expensive—a candle-lit dinner was not about romantic intimacy, but rare moments of comfort and companionship. Now our cities are so full of light that it dims the stars themselves and we have a new problem—light pollution. Any dark evening or dull morning that I come into my house, there at my finger tip is a bright light, clearer than the sun. Feasting is about brightness, a light in the dark. Now I buy a dimmer switch to reduce the glare.

And just as we are saturated with light, so are we with warmth. My house is warm even when I'm not in it. This is new. When I was a child everyone who could afford to differentiated between winter and summer underwear: We wore woolly pants and vest from November to April. My children have never worn woolen underwear. Warmth has become so normal that we find sweat distasteful. We spend millions of dollars a year not celebrating the fact that we are warm enough, but disguising it. But feasting is about warmth—about huge fires and hearty dancing.

Cleanliness is not a delight for us either. Dressing-up holds little charm; most of my peers dress *down* when we relax and socialize. I wash my hair about four times a week. I change my underwear daily. It is so easy to keep clean; getting clean is more of a routine than a celebration. Feasting is about putting on your finery, which takes so much time and effort that you cannot do it often.

We are bombarded not just with heat and light and food, but with people. I can talk to my friends, however distant, whenever I want to. There is rarely a day when I do not encounter a stranger. I want protection from a sense of inva-

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sion more often than I think how exciting it would be to see someone new. Feasting is about the joy of seeing old friends, and the excitement of meeting new people.

Such comforts are not luxuries, they are the common experience of contemporary Western humanity. Life is no longer rhythmical, a coming and a going, as it was. Until this century it was not just the very poor who might well dread a long winter, it was everyone. No one had instant light, warmth, travel, food; no one had a deep freeze, a shop open late into the night, access to music and news at the press of a button.

On the whole, all this is a good thing—I have no sentimental hankerings. But it does mean that I never fast and so I don't know how to feast: and at Christmas time I sense something missing. Feasting is about excess, extravagance, abundance. Feasting is public, celebratory, and inclusive. (It is also necessarily hard work—many of us buy plastic Christmas trees because we are too idle to vacuum up a few fallen pine needles.)

We have come to think it is rather vulgar to eat until we are bloated; to give gifts so extravagant that they put us into debt; to stuff children with candy until they are sick; to get roaring drunk, wear silly hats, and sing loud songs whose words we cannot quite remember. And because we cannot do it ourselves, we tend to despise feasting itself. I have some friends who keep to the tradition of placing a tapped beer barrel in their front garden over Christmas-tide, free for all. Last year the local clergy came and asked them to stop because people swilling beer upset those leaving midnight Mass.

Instead of feasting we go in for "spirituality." Instead of extravagance, we talk about being "less materialistic"—at Christmas for heaven's sake. The wise men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh: much is made of the theological and spiritual symbolism of these gifts, little of the crude fact that they are *very* expensive. God does not seem to mind materialism in a good cause.

But God, apparently, loves feasting. Nothing secretive or peaceful about it. A brash new star, exotic foreigners, ecstatic shepherds, choirs of angels—not just a quiet messenger, but hosts of them, pouring through the night sky singing "Glory." God chose to celebrate this feast "just at the worst time of the year," to be a light in the darkness, to comfort us on our lonely road, to prove over and over again that the things of the world are good, that fun is an ethical concept. Perhaps this is what is meant by "blessed are the poor"—they know how to feast.

I wish I were able to feast with this extravagant host. I am appalled by my pusillanimous responses: by the minginess of my imagination. I tend to criticize the menu ("virgin birth—so out of date") and carp at the behavior of less refined guests ("oh, not 'Hark-the Herald' *again*"). I wear jeans not my wedding garment, and I want the children to "calm down" and not wake up too early in the morning.

Of course they should wake up early, of course they should be overexcited, of course they should run amok and tear open their presents with greedy zeal. This is the feast day of a God who so delights in matter, in the stuff of the universe, in bodies, that he plunges into it all head first, and becomes a child. This is the feast day of a God who rips the invisible membrane between time and eternity so heaven floods the world, in an extravagant and abundant tide of love, and the world laps back, carried undiluted to the everlasting banquet. The feast of a God who comes into the cold, the dark, the silence of our prosperity and says, "Let's party."

I'm not sure that I can wear a paper hat and stop counting the cents, but that is my loss. At least I can try.

Come, let us keep the feast. □

Sara Maitland's *most recent book is* Angel Maker: The Collected Short Stories *(Henry Holt).*

James Moore & Brian Doyle

LETTER FROM OREGON

The state of euthanasia

In the only state where suicide is legal, the state of the state is confusion.

On November 4, Oregon's Ballot Measure 51, which would have overturned the physician-assisted suicide law (Measure 16) passed by voters in 1994, was soundly defeated, 60-40. That is a stunning margin, given that the 1994 law passed by a mere two percentage points.

On November 5, the federal Drug Enforcement Agency issued this statement: "The Controlled Substances Act authorizes the DEA to revoke the registration of physicians who dispense controlled substances without a legitimate medical purpose....[Issuing a prescription for deadly doses of medication] would be, in our opinion, a violation of the Act."

In the days following, the media were filled with two reactions, summed up, on one side, by Republican Senator Gordon Smith ("I support this action") and on the other by Democratic Representative Peter DeFazio ("the DEA is attempting to make criminals of physicians helping Oregonians with very personal, difficult decisions. They're way out of line, and they should just butt out").

The governor, John Kitzhaber, M.D., who spent years working in an emergency room, tiptoed around the issue: "It's up to Oregon voters to determine what appropriate medical practice is, and they've done so." No further comment; he is waiting to see what will happen with the DEA.

President Bill Clinton waits, too. According to White House spokesman, Mike McCurry, the president opposes doctor-assisted suicide, but has no official stance on Oregon's law or the DEA 's statement.

On November 25, U.S. District Judge Michael Hogan of Oregon left antisuicide activists one last legal hope: a February 1998 hearing on "standing to sue."

So, in Oregon, everyone waits: doctors, fearful of losing their DEA registration; politicians, fearful (with the excep-

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tion of Smith) of contravening a law twice approved by their constituents; patients, unable to find doctors to prescribe deadly doses of medicine; and the Catholic church, rattled by an overwhelming political defeat.

A little history of Catholicism and politics in Oregon will help here. In 1925, the Supreme Court overturned a state law that prohibited private education, a measure largely sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan. Ever since, Oregon Catholics have felt a certain edginess in political matters. While Catholics are the largest single religious group in Oregon, they make up only 10 percent of the population, and Oregon (with Alaska and Washington) is one of the most unchurched states in the nation. In short, the Catholic church doesn't have much political sway, is sensitive to anti-Catholic sentiments, and involves itself in only a few political issues.

In 1992, the Oregon Catholic Conference played a major role in defeating the first of several antigay ballot measures. But then in 1994, Ballot Measure 16 passed by a hair, for two reasons. First, Oregonians found twenty-seven measures on their ballots, among them another antigay measure. The suicide measure was the most important referendum on the ballot that year, but there were so many other measures that voters' attention was splintered. Second, the church decided to remain neutral on a new antigay measure on the ballot and poured its resources into opposing physician-assisted suicide. In addition to large financial contributions, then-Archbishop William Levada directed priests in the archdiocese to attack the measure from the pulpit. The combination of the church's change in stance on the antigay-rights measure, along with its very public attacks on assisted suicide, alienated a percentage of Oregon's electorate.

Once Measure 16 passed three years ago, the idea of assisted suicide changed in Oregon—it became reality, the law, normal, even as it languished in court. People talked in their workplaces, among friends, within families about assisted suicide and quality-of-care for the dying. Politicians were asked their opinions. Doctors started to focus on pain management, especially during the last months of life. The state soon led the country in per-capita consumption of morphine—an indication that physicians were not just discussing pain management, but were taking action to ease patients' last days. So, from being a fringe issue, assisted suicide quickly entered into the mainstream of societal concerns in Oregon.

The 1997 attempt to repeal the law came about because opponents could not persuade the Oregon legislature to repeal or alter it. Led by church leaders, the opposition did succeed in convincing enough legislators that the ballot measure needed to be revisited by the voters in light of new information about the way Measure 16 allowed for assisted suicide (studies showed that a certain number of people do not die immediately from barbiturates, even with high doses, and that in such instances death can be gruesomely prolonged).

Thus was born Measure 51, designed to repeal Measure 16. The "Yes on 51" campaign was directed and funded primarily by three groups: the Catholic church, National Right to Life, and a group of Oregon physicians. The campaign focused on the shortcomings of Measure 16 itself, not on the issue of assisted suicide.

Pre-election polls showed that a consistent 60-65 percent of voters approved of assisted suicide; but polls also showed that about 20 percent of them opposed the means mandated by Measure 16. Since the 1994 election had been decided by 30,000 votes, and since a smaller turnout could be counted on for the special off-year 1997 election, the "Yes on 51" campaign aimed its efforts at those people who did not approve of the means of physician-assisted suicide. All things being equal, the calculation was that the repeal would be successful if about 10,000 voters switched from their 1994 positions.

The repeal forces raised about $4 million for their campaign, five times as much as the "No on 51" campaign. Repeal ads flooded televisions, radios, newspapers, mailboxes, and lawn signs across the state. "No on 51" ads were noticeably absent from most venues except AM radio.

Why then did the repeal fail?

- First, the initial TV repeal ads had to be quickly pulled in most media markets. One featured a young man in a medical waiting room preparing to pick up his suicide prescription. Television stations thought that the actor looked like a minor; minors are specifically prohibited from physician-assisted suicide. The ads became a target of ridicule, and were replaced, too late, with a softer one, showing a (real) elderly woman who had been given six months to live but was still happily among the living two years later.
- Second, the implied message of the "Yes on 51" campaign was, you made a mistake in 1994, fix it in 1997. Oregonians did not think that they had made a mistake, and the backlash was considerable.
- Third, the relatively more scarce "No on 51" ads were equally off-target. Many of them emitted the unmistakable stench of anti-Catholic bigotry. One called on voters to prevent religion from forcing its views on the rest of us, an ad paid for by the "Don't Let 'em Shove Their Religion down Your Throat Committee." So perhaps some voters took the opportunity to vote against the Catholic church.

Conclusions?

- There is a serious base of support in America for physician-assisted suicide.
- Voters appear to base their votes upon their personal experiences as much as, perhaps more than, their religious views.
- Oregon's Catholic leaders misread the situation. How will other local churches do as this issue makes its way across the country?
- A chilling conclusion from Oregon: The issue of assisted suicide will increasingly be put to American voters. Catholics *must* get better at making the case against killing the dying. □

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NO HUMANITARIAN

A portrait of Mother Teresa

Mary Poplin

Last year I spent two months as a volunteer at one of the homes for children operated by the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. Like many Western visitors, I initially found the experience disorienting. Despite Mother Teresa's repeated reminders that the order's mission is religious, not social work, most Westerners who visit the homes for sick and handicapped children expect them to look like medical clinics or hospitals. They don't. Most shocking is the absence of hospital-like procedures and equipment. This can be particularly disconcerting for people who have worked in hospital settings in America and Europe. For example, during my stay in Calcutta, a group of European women arrived for a two-week stint as volunteers. They immediately were confronted with a young handicapped girl who had considerable lung congestion. Where, they wondered, was the respiratory therapy machine? Surely, given Mother Teresa's fame, such equipment was available? Informed that the home did not have such equipment, the volunteers began to protest. One healthcare professional was so distressed that she left after just a couple of days.

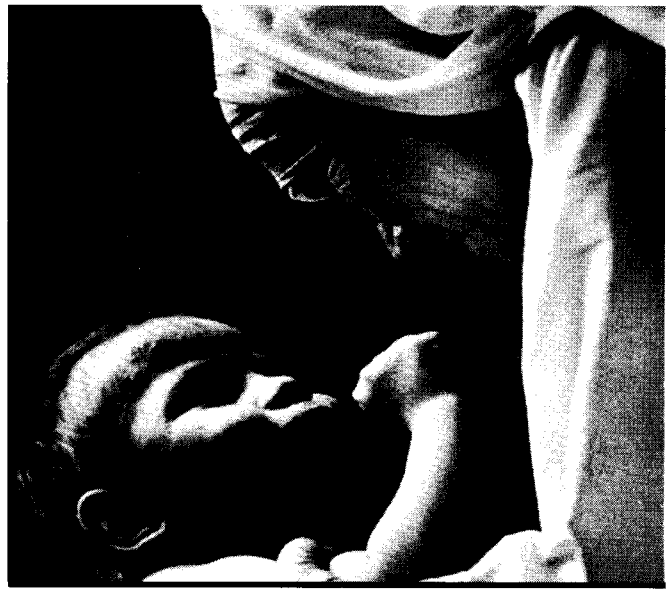
The Missionaries of Charity, one learns, resist owning anything, even medical equipment, that is not widely available to the poor. (Telephones are one of the few exceptions to this rule.) As it turned out, one of the European volunteers managed to locate a portable respiratory machine somewhere in Calcutta. The Missionaries of Charity sisters, as is their practice concerning all gifts intended for the poor, enthusiastically consented to its use. The child recovered quickly; much faster, I fear, than did the volunteers from their annoyance over the primitive medical conditions in which they had to work.

My conversations with the sisters about this incident revealed the enormous gulf between Mother Teresa's work and the everyday assumptions we make in the West about what it means to help the poor. The sisters meekly and patiently listened to the complaints of the volunteers. Rather than respond to criticism about a lack of medical equipment, however, the sisters simply and quietly did their work. "Isn't it wonderful how God provided these volunteers just when this little girl needed them?" they characteristically remarked. Indeed, the sisters' instinctive response was to thank God for one of his many miracles while the European bearers of the miracle became increasingly frustrated by the seeming obliviousness of the nuns.

I began to see the reactions of the sisters and of the Western volunteers as parallel conversations conducted between people who live in the same space and time but in some important sense not in the same world. Two different sets of assumptions and beliefs about reality are at work. I went to Calcutta in an effort to better understand the differences between the way most of us think of our social work (whether it be teaching or helping the poor or sick) and Mother Teresa's radical Christianity in action. I left believing that I had witnessed the Scriptures being lived in a way that I found both humbling and challenging.

Mother Teresa was often depicted in the media, especially upon her recent death, as a great humanist, a superior social worker. But she was not humanistic; rather, she was godly. Mother Teresa was in the world but she truly was not of the world. If you stick to just the "facts" about Mother Teresa, you can never fully describe her.

I don't want to present Mother Teresa or the Missionaries as perfect. No one is perfect. The sisters do get cross with



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one another and other people; they do make mistakes. But you cannot understand Mother Teresa's work unless you fully understand how very differently from our everyday expectations the sisters interpret and respond to what happens in the world around them. The key to understanding the Missionaries of Charity is the sacredness with which they treat all people and the humble and prayerful manner in which all the work is done. The Missionaries of Charity see Jesus in everyone they meet. They see Jesus in a twenty-year-old volunteer from New Jersey searching the Hindu temples and Buddhist ashrams of India for some sense of meaning, in an aged Muslim starved and half-eaten by rats and worms on the street, in a deformed infant just born and found in a garbage heap. They quite literally see Christ in everyone, and especially in the "poorest of the poor." The intent of their community is to treat each human being as they would Christ and to do each task they perform for the benefit of the poor as they would do it for Christ. Thus, it is Jesus' diapers they wash, his meals being prepared, and his body being tended.

Many writers have depicted Mother Teresa as someone who saw the poor and responded sympathetically to their needs. That is not quite the case. Mother Teresa served the poor not because they needed her but because God called her to the work. She was obedient to God's call, not to her social conscience. She often remarked that if God had told her what was to happen after she picked up the first dying person off the Calcutta street, she would never have done it, for she would have been too afraid. Mother Teresa called herself "a pencil in God's hand," and she meant it. One day during morning Mass, as I was sitting on the floor near her, an Indian woman came in and kept bowing to Mother and kissing her hand. Mother kept pointing to the crucifix. Finally, she took the woman's hands and pointed them to the cross and said, firmly, "It is not I, it is him. Give thanks to him."

Because of this absolute belief that it is God who works in and through them, there is no room for pride in the sisters' work. They see themselves as simply accomplishing the work God created them to do with the grace and love he gives them to do it. As a consequence, the sisters manifest both incredible humility and an unshakable sense of hope. Such attitudes are radically different from, and perhaps even at odds with, the motivations behind most social work as we know it. Most of of us are drawn to serve the poor out of empathy or pity. Serving the poor is something we decide to do out of our own energy, guilt, or goodness. In this humanistic equation, pride is an ever present temptation.

Things are very different for the Missionaries of Charity. A firm acceptance of divine providence sets them apart from our common assumptions about how the world works. As the sisters' response to the seemingly fortuitous arrival of the respiratory equipment demonstrates, they literally believe that through prayer God provides all that is needed. Many stories of divine providence are told by the Missionaries. There's the day when there was no food and miraculously the schools in Calcutta were closed and all the bread destined for the schools was delivered to the Missionaries. There's the time when answered prayers brought about a cease-fire in Beirut, allowing the sisters to rescue some handicapped children. I myself saw a child who had struggled for months to stay alive evidently healed after a night of prayer. Prayer, not medical or physical work, is the first task of the Missionaries. Prayer is their method, their technology.

A belief that somehow needs will be met as they arise as long as the sisters are doing God's work makes their mission a direct and daily task rather than an indirect and long-term strategy like the antipoverty initiatives we in the West are familiar with. For example, the Missionaries do not question those who come to them for help. A person shows up with an empty pot for her family or just walks in off the street for a plate of food. All are served, for a year or even for every day of their lives. Indeed, those without a pot or plate are fed first. When I was in Calcutta a rumor circulated that some women were reselling the food on the street. While many of the volunteers and paid workers were disturbed by this possibility, the sisters were not. It was God's work, the sisters assured us, he would see to it that all would be well.

In contrast, modern welfare systems use extensive qualification criteria that frequently prevent some from getting the help they need and become a game to get around for others. Rather than directly serving the poor, social workers are often engaged in mounds of paperwork in efforts to monitor and police the aid, and in complying with rules and regulations that actually inhibit meeting the needs of those they seek to serve. These indirect, abstract, and bureaucratic forms of assistance distance the server from the served. They also, I believe, distance the server from his or her own life mission.

To the Missionaries of Charity we are all both worthy and unworthy, and it is only through the grace of God that we have what we have. The sisters literally do not worry about the scarcity of resources, about policing their beneficiaries, and least of all about their own needs. As the Scriptures promise, the sisters believe that the more you give, the more is given to you.

Needless to say, this is contrary to all secular political reasoning. At first glance many of the differences between the work of the Missionaries and that of social workers appear to stem from the fact that the sisters live the lives of the people they serve. They live in the poorest neighborhoods and they know their neighbors. They know the demands of poverty in a way most of us as social workers do not—the time it takes to hand wash clothes on the concrete, to collect water from the spigot, to shop each day for food, to cook over coals, to walk or use poor public transportation. They do not commute to the communities in which they work and return to middle-class lives in the evenings.

Each sister owns no more than what will fit into a small box. Each of them has three saris, one for special occasions, and two which are alternated; one is washed each day while the other is worn. Each of them has a prayer book and song

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book with covers made out of what appears to be brown paper bags—the books' pages typed on old manual typewriters—a Bible, a cup and dish, a pillow, pillow case and two sheets, a rosary, and a crucifix pin which holds the sari securely. The sisters eat like the poor. And like those they serve, they look forward to ice cream the day after Easter and the day after Christmas.

The destitute families know the sisters understand their plight. Most of the sick infants with whom I worked had to be left with us for an extended period to get well. The parents were not afraid to admit to the sisters that they couldn't care for their children during such illnesses. Sometimes we even had healthy babies whose parents were ill or in crisis. The Missionaries do not judge these parents for their inability to take care of the infants. They do not think of poor parents as the enemies of poor children, as is too often done in this country.

To really comprehend what the sisters are about, however, it is important to understand that they do not embrace this hard life simply to better understand and serve the poor. Rather, they are poor in order to follow Christ, who chose to be poor, to be born in a stable, to live and die with no possessions. Elected poverty is a reparation, in part, for the materialistic sins of the world. Mother Teresa was firm about the source of poverty; she said, "God does not create poverty, we do, because we do not share." But when asked why she didn't become more involved in the politics of poverty and world hunger, she replied, "that was not my calling, God calls others to this task. Me he just called to tend the poorest of the poor. We must each stay faithful to our own call, be faithful to the things God calls each of us to do and do them with holiness."

Things are very different for the Missionaries. A firm acceptance of divine providence sets them apart from our common assumptions about how the world works. They literally believe that God provides all that is needed through prayer.

Mother Teresa further insisted that the commitments to poverty, chastity, and obedience afford the Missionaries a protection from evil. For example, having embraced radical poverty, there is nothing material that can be used to tempt them. This is the same reason they do not ask for money or devote their energies to procuring the best of modern medical technology. They do not want to be tempted to do things in order to obtain or manage money and thus be drawn away from their primary call "to serve the poorest of the poor with free, whole-hearted service."

In Christopher Hitchens's widely publicized book on Mother Teresa, *The Missionary Position* (Verso), he criticizes her for accepting money and awards from those he considers criminals. Yet just as she asked no questions of the needy, Mother Teresa never considered investigating the lives of those who gave to her. Indeed, she never solicited money. Moreover, the Bible clearly promises that wealth ill-gotten will eventually end up with the poor (Proverbs 13 and 28). As one sister who worked closely with Mother explained to me, "the Missionaries are always happy to accept individual donations as the expression of divine providence. Neither Mother Teresa nor the Missionaries of Charity allows others to raise money in our name. As a matter of fact, whenever we hear of this being done, we take pains to stop it. Mother wants people to give freely and sacrificially, being moved in their hearts by God to do so, rather than just taking part in a social fund-raiser."

Similarly, I have read criticism suggesting that at the end of her life Mother Teresa got the best of health care and the latest technology while the poor around her went without. To the best of my knowledge she got medical attention (not necessarily the best) primarily when she was unconscious and unable to protest. (The children in the order's homes are also taken to the hospital when needed.) In fact, I took with me to Calcutta offers of medical assistance for her. One of the inventors of the latest pacemaker wanted to donate one to Mother as well as the medical services to replace her old one. Through another sister she refused politely, saying she couldn't accept special privileges not given the poor. The sisters are deeply committed to living as close to the poor as possible and anyone who has been to Calcutta for any length of time comes to understand the seriousness and the benefits of this vow.

During my stay I had an opportunity to talk to Mother Teresa about Hitchens's book. "Mother, there are people who write in books that you are one of the wealthiest women in the world, and you don't need any more money," I said. She looked at me, at first quizzically, and then nodded in recognition. "Oh yes, the book. I haven't read it but some of the sisters have. It matters not, he [the author] is forgiven." I laughed and said, "Yes, Mother, in the end of the book, he says he knew you said you forgave him and he's irate because he says he didn't ask you to forgive him and he didn't need it." She looked at me as though I hadn't understood, then gently and confidently instructed me, "Oh, it is not I who forgives, it is God, it is God. God forgives."

Another sister told me how a group of sisters had read the book, then gathered in prayer to discern its meaning. They wanted to know what was God's message to them. "It is a call for us to become more holy," one said. Others agreed. The Missionaries look at such trials and insults as times for self-examination, to build humility and patience, to love their enemies—opportunities to become more holy. Even illness is often interpreted as a way of coming closer to God, as a way of God revealing himself more clearly, and as an opportunity to discern problems in one's own character more profoundly.

We spend a great deal of time in our lives trying to ease and avoid suffering, and when it comes, we do not know

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what to do with it. Even less do we know how to help others who suffer. We fight it, assign blame to individuals and social systems, and try to protect ourselves. Rarely do any of us consider how suffering might be a gift from God, to call us to become more holy. While we often say that crisis and suffering builds character, we avoid both whenever we can, and expend much effort creating techniques to compensate for, minimize, or overcome the suffering. In fact, much of our secular literature suggests that Mother Teresa and the Missionaries are psychologically flawed in their acceptance of pain and suffering. Having worked alongside them, I think nothing could be further from the truth. We Americans are rarely encouraged to take responsibility for our own suffering. Yet regardless of the situation, each of us, at the very least, has choices to make about how we respond to suffering. To the Missionaries, suffering is not merely a physical experience, but a spiritual encounter, one that encourages them to learn new responses, to seek forgiveness, to turn to God, to think like Christ, and to rejoice that the suffering has produced a good work in them. It is, finally, a spur to action.

Mother Teresa often said, quoting her namesake Thérèse of Lisieux, that while most of us think our lives should be about doing great things, we rather are called to do small things with great love. This is the phrase that best exemplifies the work with the Missionaries of Charity, most of whom will never be known for the millions of little tasks of great love they do in the world. When most of us do such everyday chores, we give them little thought or care. One day, for example, I was helping the sisters with the washing. "Someone should donate a washing machine for all these diapers and clothes," I said. A sister immediately replied, "Oh no, we don't need a washing machine; Jesus helps us wash, love helps us." Washing diapers was never quite the same for me again. The love the sister spoke of is not love that I am used to thinking about or acting on. The Missionaries put real love into the daily tasks of cooking, serving and cleaning up after a meal, washing diapers, smiling at strangers, squashing their own needs and desires, answering the phone, or picking up trash that isn't theirs. When you see such love at work you come to realize how such an ardent love of God enables us to truly love humankind, especially "the poorest of the poor."

It is that love, as Mother Teresa showed us, whose work produces not tiredness but energy. It is not humanistic love drawn from pride and pity, willing to sacrifice goodness for sweetness. It is not a love where anything goes because you are poor or because you are privileged, or where bitterness and anger or indulgence blind the server and the served. It is not tough love. It is not a love where we expect something in return. It is a strong and sacrificial love, the love that allows a sister to pull worms out of the flesh of another human being while being cursed for doing so. It is the love that never gets bitter, that never gives up. It is the love that haunts us when reading Christ's instructions to his disciples, "*What good is it if you love those who love you, do not even the sinners love those who love them?*"

"You fall more in love with Jesus everyday," Mother Teresa told me one day, shaking her finger and looking me right in the eye. She did not know my name or what I do. She had often seen me sitting near her during Mass and adoration, and we had bowed to one another during the kiss of peace. We had spoken directly to one another very little. I now think of her words as a message from the Holy Spirit. Every cell in my body knew what she meant. She was telling me, you cannot do faith in your head. I said, "Yes, Ma'am." □

John Fandel

A Question at Duskrise

Now the Flag on the flagpole next the water
might just as well be a blister on the pole,
a colored blister, a kind of barber pole
in front of a clipjoint, CLOSED, so not moving:
not swirling:
not waving:

It is that still.
Fraught, tho, like a codicil to a will?
No, no, nothing like that—
more like a blessing....
Not a ripple on the sea
not swirling
not waving
but deeply moving
nor a swimmer
in the sea, other than shark, whale, shiner.
minnow.
Certain Saints—not the pillar/pole extremist, no—
fanatic
absolutist
prayed for this absolute diction of silence.
resolute
Ought not we sinners, then, rejoice in pure gift?
So still.
Are we living inside a paperweight?
(lucite)
If so, what are we holding down
that gravity can't?
handle

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Richard Alleva

HENRY JAMES MADE CARNAL

'Wings of the Dove'

The final fictions of Henry James are royal works of art, but royalty can be exasperating. My loving quarrel with *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl*, and *The Ambassadors* is about the way a mist or fog seems so often to envelop the characters and settings. Out of the mist comes, often thrillingly, the thoughts of the protagonists, their ethical struggles, their formidable efforts to discern the motives of others. But I have terrible difficulty in seeing the characters themselves—their faces, bodies, glances, gestures. James may repeatedly tell us that Kate Croy is "the handsome girl," but her specific handsomeness never quite meets the inward eye. Joyce went much further with stream-of-consciousness than James, but one always sees or feels the sturdiness of Bloom, the voluptuousness of Molly, the angularity of Stephen. Did James, who earlier portrayed people so vividly, so visually in *The Bostonians* and *Washington Square*, grow tired in his later years of the animality of human beings?

Well, there is no such thing as an immaterial movie, though there may be austere and highly spiritual ones, such as *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Even mist becomes a solid entity when captured on film. How then could such a truly ethereal book as *The Wings of the Dove* be turned into a film?

And the answer is: with boldness, with taste, with more than a pinch of sensationalism, and with a drastic narrowing of scope.

To be sure, the script by Hossein Amini is faithful enough to the novel's plot even though it pushes the *fin-de-siècle* period ten years forward, with dialogue that cleverly foreshadows the snappiness of the Jazz Age while retaining vestiges of Victorian restraint. (James's later fiction does straddle the Victorian period and modernism, so the stylistic blend is apt.) As in the book, Kate Croy, kept from marrying impecunious Merton Densher by a purseproud aunt, puts her lover on the scent of the dying millionairess Milly Theale, so that the frustrated British lovers may get those millions when the American heiress succumbs. But what glamorous solidities this trio now inhabits! The dinner parties with the camera gliding above table and guests, golden sunlight streaming on London parks, equally glamorous gloom seeping through bookshop windows, the Venetian canals made of blue velvet on which glide gondolas containing giddy lovers whose voices ring out against the stones of overarching bridges: paragraphs and pages of painstaking analysis of motivation and intention have been supplanted on screen by the pleasures of travelogue.

And wherever James was airily vague, the director, Iain Softley, is hardheaded and specific. Kate's father slouches now under no nameless disgrace but is revealed in an opium den smoking dope with a trollop. The great physician Sir Luke Strett no long benevolently beams at his patient during the vaguest medical examination in literary history but gives Milly the most up-to-date radiation treatments that 1910 could provide. James worried at the quiddity of emotions; Iain Softley rejoices in the thinginess of things.

And, needless to add, in the sexiness of sex. In his introduction to the new Everyman edition of the novel, Grey Gowrie calls *The Wings* "James's most erotic novel" and even something of a "bodice-ripper." I think he exaggerated in order to entice readers, but there's no denying that Softley and Amini have, indeed, made an intellectual bodice-ripper. Densher and Kate now claw at each other on an ascending elevator as if they were in *Fatal Attraction*, copulate in a Venetian alleyway, and have a final tryst which I will have more to say about anon.

The entire cast is admirable and two of the three leads are memorable. Linus Roache, with his fragile chin and piercing eyes, captures very well Densher's basic decency not quite smothered by pusillanimity, but any unfortunate actor assigned this role must contend with the fact that James fell in love with his heroines, and it is they who cry out for the magnetism here amply supplied by Allison Elliott as Milly and Helena Bonham Carter as Kate.

Elliott embodies, to an astonishing extent, what it was about the American maiden that infatuated James: the eyes so modestly downcast one moment, so frankly staring the next; the boldness of address that never congratulates itself on its boldness; a candor that enacts itself with startling truth-telling but never stoops to mere bluntness. (I would venture that Elliott has spent some fruitful hours watching Lillian Gish in D.W. Griffith movies.) In her last scenes, the actress even gets at James's peculiar idea of sainthood: a matter not of social action or self-sacrifice or intellectual influence, but an innate glow found only (for James) in American girls looking for love, a glow that reaches, overpowers, and transforms the mere sensual creatures that come into contact with them.

And we see the concussion of this saintliness on Roache's Densher and, even more movingly, on Bonham Carter's Kate. Carter, an actress blessed, or cursed, with a kewpie doll's face and a Brit debutante's diction, seemed to find her talent when she found her anger in *Howard's End*, railing against injustice. Here, her anger at being turned by her aunt into a commodity on the marriage market makes believable Kate's effort to escape that market by pushing her lover into the heiress's bed (thus turning *him* into a marketable item!). There is nothing monochromatic about Carter's acting; she is also adept at tenderness and flippancy. But an almost palpable bristling animates and certifies all her work here.

The resplendent solidity of the movie has its drawbacks. These came home to me very early on with a medium shot of Kate being made up by her aunt at a dressing table. Both women are sitting

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but Kate faces the camera straight on, as motionless as a mannequin, her only movement the widening of her eyes as her aunt lines them with kohl. The older woman leans in, working on the girl's face like an artist finishing a canvas. Expressing the commodification of Kate's beauty and the enslavement of vital but impoverished youth by calcified and moneyed age, the shot is efficient, even memorable. But if you turn to the passage from which this scene is derived, a scant two sentences astonish you with a complexity that is rare in the film (Densher is at a soiree at which he sees Kate perform like an actress and her aunt like a theatrical director):

> He struck himself as having lost, for the moment, his presence of mind—so that in any case he only stared in silence at the older woman's technical challenge and at the younger one's disciplined face. It was as if the drama was between them, them quite preponderantly, with Merton Densher relegated to mere spectatorship, a paying place in front, and one of the most expensive.

There we get not only the captivity of the girl but her complicity in it, and the impotence of the idealistic lover and outsider who observes the bond between the two foes. I'm not citing this as an instance of literature's superiority to cinema (a superiority I don't grant), but as an example of the difference between an artist who delves deep and lesser artists who settle for a one-dimensional impact.

On the other hand, the filmmakers do bring out a surprising number of the novel's themes, especially that of the destruction of carnal love through contact with spiritual purity. Disapproval has been expressed about the film's penultimate scene in which Kate bares her body in a desperate effort to keep her lover after Milly's death. There are no naked ladies in Henry James, some critics rather prissily inform us. But it seems to me that the scene conveys with passionate imagery precisely what James expressed in his allusive prose. The poet of Psalm 55 cries out, "O that I had wings like a dove! For then would I flee away" from "the enemy...minded to do me some mischief." But, alas! That enemy is the woman Densher loves, Kate, and the "mischief" she does him is to remind him of the dishonorable designs they had on Milly. The eroticism of the scene is a legitimate expression of the combat of sacred and profane love and, like the entire movie, powerfully narrows and (literally) embodies the last expansive moral lessons of the Master. □

STAGE

Celia Wren

LOOKING FOR SOUL

'The Scarlet Pimpernel,' 'Triumph of Love,' & 'Gross Indecency'

About the French Revolution, Charles Dickens remarked that it is "a wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other." Human inscrutability, arguably, gives *A Tale of Two Cities* its power, allowing the book to illustrate, but never truly to explain, how one person can voluntarily suffer the guillotine, another send him there, and a third watch the bloodshed while knitting.

Comparable wonder and horror imbue the opening seconds of a new Broadway musical about the French Revolution. In the first scene of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, a murky light plays over a dungeon packed with tearful aristocrats. After a moment, the dungeon's walls part and swivel to reveal a Parisian square dominated by a guillotine, the focus of a dozen capering *sans-culottes*. As the revolutionaries open their mouths to sing, the sinister plunges to the ridiculous.

Unintentional comedy is the shoal around which all musicals tack. We need good reason to accept humans caroling at the drop of a hat, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, with an easy-listening score by Frank Wildhorn and inane book and lyrics by Nan Knighton, doesn't give us any. Lines like "we are cut from the same surly star/like two jewels in the sky sharing fire," recall Beaumarchais's dictum that "What is too stupid to say, must be sung."

More curious, though, is the farcical humor that makes the show deviate sharply from Baroness Orczy's original novel. This Pimpernel's band of Englishmen do not divert suspicion by *pretending* to be bumbling fops as they steal victims from the Terror: they really *are* bumbling fops, who have taken a crash course in French and who flaunt Christmas-pantomime disguises in enemy territory. The climactic confrontation between the Pimpernel (played with zealous effeminacy by Douglas Sills) and the sanguinary French mastermind Chauvelin (a sullen Terrence Mann) involves a burlesque fencing match, a basket of bloody heads, and the completely gratuitous introduction of Madame Tussaud.

Even the immortal humorist Dickens slacked on the comedy when it came to the French Revolution: Why has this Broadway team played it for laughs? Certainly some of the scenes—"The Creation of Man" chorus, for example, with the mincing Prince of Wales (David Cromwell)—are genuinely funny, and it is almost a relief that the production doesn't take itself seriously. But the camp style makes the whole enterprise unnervingly self-conscious—everyone, including the audience, knows there's kitsch on the stage. And everyone celebrates it.

Perhaps the clowning reflects musical comedy's vaudeville heritage. Or perhaps it is covering up for something else. The philosopher Henri Bergson speculated that we laugh at "automatism and inelasticity" in human life: at people operating on auto pilot, without thought — behaving like bumbling

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fops, for instance. We laugh because we recognize the same reflexes within ourselves; the other person is not, after all, in Dickens's words, a secret and a mystery.

Farce may be serving as a shield for *The Scarlet Pimpernel*: Recognizing ourselves in the buffoons on stage, we're meant to disregard the absence of coherent story, eloquent music, or character. We're meant to overlook the fact that, after the opening Gothic gloom, this play really contains no secret and no mystery at all.

Lack of substance is not a failing of *Triumph of Love*, another new blockbuster musical with a tenuous connection to eighteenth-century France. Based on Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux's comedy of 1732, with music by Jeffrey Stock, a book by James Magruder, and lyrics by Susan Birkenhead, the production boasts Betty Buckley as the sour spinster Hesione, and F. Murray Abraham as her philosopher-brother Hermocrates.

Imbroglios and scenes of cross-dressing yield plenty of scope for slapstick, but ideas, literate banter, and even mock semiotics ballast the foolery. Is love worth more than philosophy? Does too much contemplation cramp the human spirit? How about "trigonometric science and the meaning of meaning," Hermocrates' favorite course of study? *Triumph of Love* sports with these questions, its elegantly choreographed confusion spinning exceptional performers into the spotlight, one after another: Buckley crooning a spectacularly husky ballad, or the Harlequin (Roger Bart) capering through the pool-table-green garden that constitutes the set.

With its frolicking *commedia dell'arte* clowns, the comedy in *Triumph of Love* has a sterling pedigree — mostly. Also in abundance are wacky quips ("Yes, your blond and tallness," the Harlequin yelps to his master Agis, played by the blond and tall Christopher Sieber), in-jokes (a dance pose that alludes to the current Broadway revival of *The King and I*), and lyrics that rhyme "rotten" with "days-old peas *au-gratin*." In places, too, this show resorts to the camp humor that characterizes *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; as a culminating witticism, Abraham slinks onto the stage in silks and satins — Louis Quatorze meets Priscilla Queen of the Desert.

Playfulness, catchy songs, and champion performances don't, finally, add up to soul. One is left with the suspicion that the play's creators concerned themselves more with ingredients — big-name stars, a high-concept book — than with overall vision. And in case the recipe does not please, why not add a few extra laughs? Viewers not satisfied with the cast's charisma, or with a few knock-out numbers flavored with global dance rhythms, may at least appreciate Betty Buckley in Marie Antoinette hairdo, complete with toy boat.

The ploy doesn't quite succeed: ultimately, *Triumph of Love* is easy to admire, but hard to love, recalling Bergson's theory that "the comic demands...a momentary anesthesia of the heart."

The shield of comedy can buckle at the wrong moment, a fact poignantly expressed in a play that is threatening to become a modern classic. *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, by Moisés Kaufman, was hailed by the critics when it opened last February; in addition to the now long-playing New York production, a second cast has just opened in San Francisco. Juggling several roles apiece, nine actors animate a script that Kaufman compiled—brilliantly—from trial transcripts, press accounts, and books by and about one of the nineteenth century's greatest wits. Constant references to textual sources and the juxtaposition of contradictory accounts, emphasized by the use of old volumes as props, make *Gross Indecency* more than a portrait of one unfortunate writer: the play shows how we all fabricate stories to explain, and dismiss, reality.

Much of the script pits the progressively traumatized Wilde (Edward Hibbert in New York; the original star, Michael Emerson, now in San Francisco) against stuffy bewigged prosecutors who hurl at him quotations from his own writing. A master of repartée, Wilde easily evades at first, but eventually, in the momentum of his own ripostes, he falls into a trap. "Oh dear, no," he replies when asked if he kissed a certain servant. "He was a peculiarly plain boy."

Instantly the prosecution, seizing the advantage, begins the onslaught that will end in the author's disgrace and imprisonment. With a single *plaisanterie*, it seems to the audience, Wilde has sealed his own fate. A fissure opens up in the surface of comedy, and we understand the painful, lonely apartness that makes each human being a secret and a mystery to all others. □

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A riot of loving, longing, finding

Four Letters of Love
Niall Williams
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $23, 257 pp.

Alice McDermott

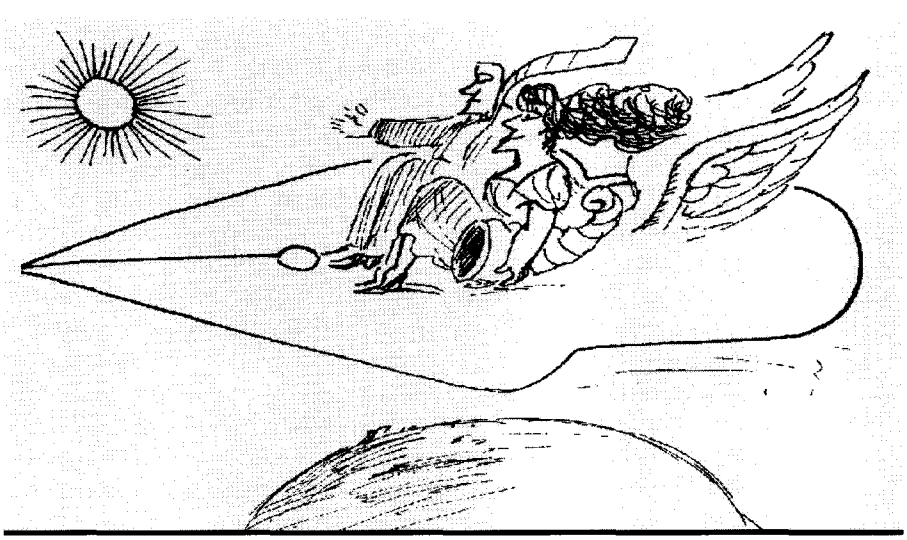
This is a novel about love: romantic love, filial love, married love, sexual love, love of God, love of nature, love of place; love in all its frailty, in all its failings, and love triumphant, even miraculous. It is a heady, often breathless novel, Niall Williams's first, and like its subject it is by turns marvelous, exhausting, heartbreaking, overblown, and delightful. A complicated love story that is buoyed throughout and in each its turnings by the author's own clear love of words.

In Dublin, Nicholas Coughlan's father hears the voice of God and suddenly abandons his civil service career, abandons, too, his dependent wife and child, and travels to the west coast of Ireland to paint. "It is," he says, "what God wants me to do."

Simultaneously, on a small island off the Galway coast, eleven-year-old Isabel Gore, the schoolmaster's daughter, the island's beauty, dances a mad dance at the edge of the sea while her brother Sean, a musical prodigy, plays the fiddle. When the dance ends she turns to find that Sean has been stricken lame and mute, "as stilled and useless as an instrument laid aside, God gone to play on someone else."

From these two disparate events, these two arbitrary, even frivolous acts of God, Williams traces the fate—the workings of God and of angels but most especially of the human heart—that will eventually lead Nicholas to Isabel and the love he was born for.

It is not a simple journey. Nicholas's father returns from his first summer sojourn with a series of canvases that strike his son as "the paintings of a demented child." Nevertheless, come the following spring, his father goes off again. His mother, under the burden of her husband's God-directed obsession, slowly fades into her own kind of madness until, overwhelmed "by the weight of failed hope and lost love," she takes her own life, even as her husband once again returns home.



Meanwhile, Isabel Gore leaves the island for a convent school in Galway. She carries with her the guilt that she has somehow caused her brother's illness, and, as a corollary to that guilt, an insatiable longing for freedom. In her final year at school, this longing finds its embodiment in Peader O'Luing, the twenty-five-year-old son of a Galway tweed merchant, a man so unsuited to the intensity of her desire that the "sickening mystery of his own heart" causes him to fall out of love with her the moment she declares her love for him. And yet for Isabel, who has sacrificed her university career and taken a job at the tweed shop, the loss of love "was the inescapable payback for what she had caused her brother...it was the judgment of God."

Six months after his mother's death, Nicholas's father is once again compelled to return to the west coast. This time, Nicholas follows. For six days he watches his father do God's bidding, creating paintings that show "God's changing humor...the sky in the sea like an aging face." At night Nicholas recites his schoolboy Latin for the man, "the sudden sweetness of the holy language" confirming for them both that "yes, those paintings of the sea were the very things that [God] himself had brought William Coughlan there to paint."

On the last day of this enchanted—and beautifully described—excursion, all but two of the paintings are accidentally destroyed. And yet only one of them is needed to advance Nicholas's fate, the one that is awarded to Muiris Gore, an island schoolmaster, as first place prize in a national poetry contest to which his wife, in a gesture born of her once-consuming love for him, submitted a poem he had written long ago.

It is this painting that brings Nicholas to the island after his father's death. He

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arrives an utter stranger, desolate, grieving, and one day after Isabel's unhappy marriage to Peader. "You're too late," a widowed neighbor cries after him. "Everything is always too late." (One of the great pleasures of the book is the number of perfectly drawn minor characters, from Peader's monstrous date-eating mother to a timid priest who prays to be spared any miracles, characters who offer a bit of relief from the more emotionally charged protagonists' struggles with God and love.)

Isabel's mother senses immediately that with Nicholas's arrival, "healing was beginning," and her premonition becomes quite literally true. In what the islanders see as nothing short of a miracle, Sean emerges from his mysterious illness in Nicholas's presence. He begins to walk and talk and play music again and takes Nicholas with him to Galway to show Isabel how he has recovered. There is among the family "a quickened sense of plot, an air of verb."

The scene of their meeting is not described. "Some things," Nicholas tells us, "do not bear much telling." But Nicholas returns to the island so clearly lovestruck that Isabel's mother smells in the air about him the scent of crushed roses. It is at this point of the novel that the story grows understandably breathless. Throughout, Williams has described so many different kinds of love, so many romances, so much emotion, and described them so well, that the descriptions of Nicholas's passion for the absent Isabel begin to feel somewhat strained and the novel hits a kind of stasis as Nicholas writes his love letters and Margaret Gore methodically destroys them, even the one that consists only of a single word, the four letters of love.

But this is a small shortcoming in a novel filled with so many delightful moments and momentous turns. An unabashedly romantic novel about the many faces of love that manages, finally, to prove that in this instance at least "the plots of God and of love came together and were the same thing." □

Alice McDermott's *fourth novel,* Charming Billy, *will be published in January.*

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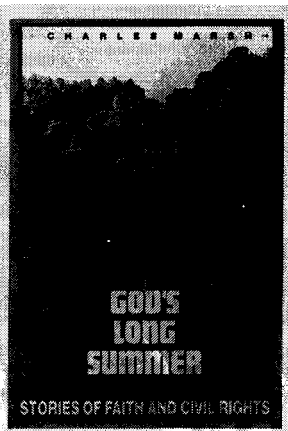

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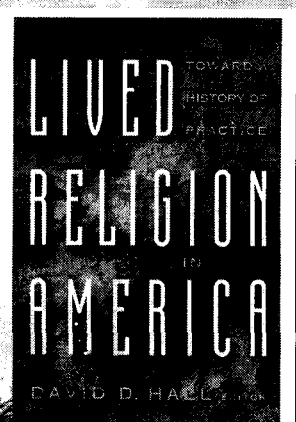

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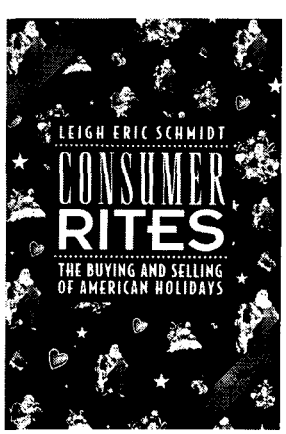

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AN UNLIKELY BELIEVER

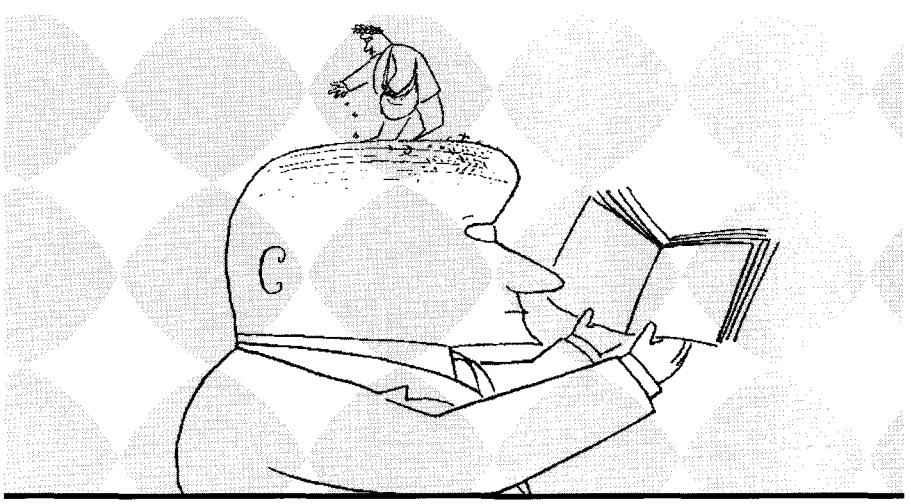
Edmund Wilson
Centennial Reflections
Edited by Lewis M. Dabney
Princeton University Press, $12.95, 293 pp.

Paul Baumann

Patriotic Gore (1962), Edmund Wilson's fat, endlessly fascinating book about the literature of the American Civil War, was the first thing I read of his. That was the summer I graduated from college. I had been hired by a professor to work on the restoration of his 144-year-old house overlooking the Connecticut River, and discovered *Patriotic Gore* at the small village library. I read it in the attic room where I stayed. Seeing me with a copy of the book, my host recalled how Wilson, as a scholar-in-residence at the college, had visited the house. Wilson, a heavy-set man and animated talker and drinker, had his chair collapse beneath him in the midst of some literary disputation. The great man of letters was uninjured and undeflected in argument by the fragility of the furniture.

Wilson's ability to combine a passion for literature with a sharp sense of history and personality proved intoxicating after the courses in literary criticism I had taken in college. In *Patriotic Gore* he famously championed Ulysses S. Grant, a failure at nearly everything except saving the Union, and then a failed president who on his deathbed wrote his *Memoirs* to provide for his family. Wilson made Grant, as well as William Sherman and John Mosby and Robert E. Lee, seem like characters out of Homer. The fierce, unblinking patrician Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the weary eloquence of Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, were other revelations. Despite the often obscure nature of his subjects, Wilson's nimble literary analysis and authoritative judgments convinced you that it was as important to know what Mary Chestnut thought as what Abraham Lincoln thought.

Some books are forever associated with the places where you read them. There was something of that in my discovering Wilson's remarkable cast of nineteenth-century Americans in a house the author had visited, and especially in a house whose former inhabitants, one imagined, must have waited anxiously for news of the Grand Army of the Republic. In any event, without fuss Wilson conveyed a depth and thickness of history as well as a profound sense of how the past touches on the present. His personal, often idiosyncratic, connection to the American past made a large impression on me.



Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections reminds us that Wilson's intellectual and literary journalism made a large impression on a great many people. Alfred Kazin, C. Vann Woodward, Michael Walzer, Elizabeth Hardwick and two dozen more scholars, journalists, and writers make contributions to this volume, the result of symposia held at Princeton University and New York City's Mercantile Library in 1995. *Patriotic Gore* is the subject of several essays and two panel discussions, one on the book's controversial preface (in which Wilson dubiously equated Lincoln's aims and ambitions with Bismarck's and Lenin's and all three to the instinctive predations of sea slugs), the other on his neglect of black writers. There is also a discussion of *To the Finland Station*, Wilson's influential history of the idea of Marxism, and another where contributors offer more personal reminiscences. Various essays assess elements of Wilson's achievement and intellectual style, including his romanticism, debt to Enlightenment rationalism, and literary criticism. Sharp words are exchanged about Wilson's failure to grasp the malign nature of Lenin and communism and about his ignorance of nineteenth-century black writing. His crankish political views—as Jason Epstein notes, Wilson was a man of the nineteenth, if not the eighteenth century—and sometimes oddly impersonal understanding of sexuality are also noted.

These "reflections" give much instruction and pleasure. In one of the better essays, Andrew Delbanco, the literary critic, offers a shrewd assessment of Wilson's enduring appeal. "In Wilson's own writing there is a peculiar combination of belligerence and enthusiasm, a voice that is somehow sophisticated and callow at the same time." That captures an undeniable quality of Wilson's style, the vigorous way in which he communicated both his unflagging curiosity and his urge to connect what he was learning—and simultaneously sharing with readers—to the immense amount he already knew. Wilson wrote an almost transparent prose—W.H. Auden called it "clear-window"—and was a genius

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at laying out what an author was up to and to what extent, in Wilson's judgment, he or she succeeded. His interests were encyclopedic, ranging from the Dead Sea Scrolls to Pushkin to New York State's Iroquois Indians. He also wrote fiction (*Memoirs of Hecate County*), plays, and a torrent of book reviews. His posthumous diaries only added to his reputation as a social observer and quintessential American sensibility. Indeed, Neale Reinitz makes an interesting case for considering the diaries as the "big" novel Wilson always intended but never managed to write.

Surprisingly, there is also much to be said about Wilson's attitude toward religion. Long a cantankerous atheist ("We must learn to live without religion," Wilson told Kazin), he nevertheless had a keen interest in religion, especially as it touched on his sense of American identity. Mark Krupnick's essay, "Edmund Wilson and Gentile Philo-Semitism," links Wilson's admiration for Judaism to his sense of himself as a descendant of Presbyterian Calvinists (and of Cotton Mather on his mother's side), those American Puritans who thought of themselves as establishing a New Israel in the American wilderness.

In a similar vein, Delbanco calls attention to Wilson as a "not quite repressible believer," detecting in his admiration for the dignity and spiritual strength of those caught up in the tragedy of the Civil War the paradox of Wilson's own yearnings and indomitable will: "Wilson thinks, [they are] all in the grip of a delusion—but it is a delusion the critic is desperate not to give up." That "delusion," the moral instinct that had brought on war, Delbanco explains, was inherited from biblical religion's effort to "place beyond human reach the caretaker of [our] own standards." Wilson resisted that absolutizing religious impulse, thinking it too often ended in fanaticism and bloodshed. But "such a vision, or the hope of retrieving it," Delbanco writes, "seems to me to have animated Wilson throughout his lifetime." □

Paul Baumann *is executive editor of* Commonweal.

FIGHTING IRISH

The Angel of Darkness
Caleb Carr
Random House, $29.95, 629 pp.

Thomas Deignan

Partisans of historical fiction, having recently slogged their way through Don DeLillo's brutal, brilliant rendering of the cold war, and Thomas Pynchon's version of colonial Williamsburg, may want to give the postmodern sections of their brains a breather with *The Angel of Darkness*, Caleb Carr's follow-up to his wildly popular 1993 best-seller, *The Alienist*.

Indeed, Carr reassembles the entire cast of characters from *The Alienist*—the ruffian narrator Stevie Taggart, the spirited Susan Howard, the brainy Isaacson brothers, *Times* scribe John Schuyler Moore, and the brooding, enigmatic alienist Laszlo Kreizler—to solve a baby kidnapping. The chase leads them into Manhattan's loathsome nether world, *circa* 1897, and the darkest corners of the human mind. Neither this book, nor *The Alienist*, is merely guilty pleasure. But the charm of *The Angel of Darkness*—aside from Carr's reconstruction of upper- and lower-crust Manhattan—is its page-turning allure, an element too often sacrificed in more cerebral fare.

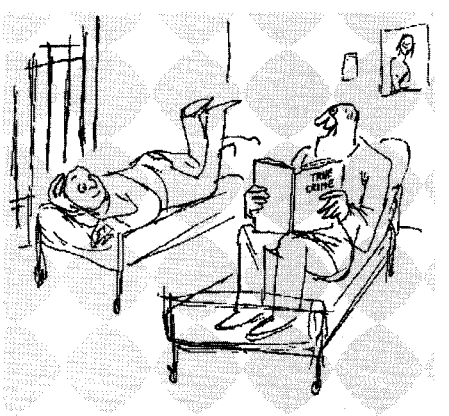
This time around, Susan, now an independent investigator (and still an impassioned feminist), calls on the gang to help solve the disappearance of a Spanish official's daughter. And with tensions high, on the eve of the Spanish-American War, it's anybody's guess where the true motivation for this crime lies.

Stevie Taggart's own tangled past helps lead the group to Elspeth Hunter—known to the denizens of the Lower East Side's cocaine dens as Libby Hatch. A mother with endless charm, shifting identities, and an "animal" stare, Libby's "natural" proclivity to nurture seems to be conflicting with (or complementing) a murderous impulse. "She's not just breaking the law," Susan explains regrettably, "she's defying the order of things."

Carr, here, is playing with material that could quickly turn polemical, reactionary, or both. From Susan Smith, who drowned her children, to the *au pair* trial, women who kill children continue to fascinate and confound. But overall, neither political profundity nor moral ambiguity is Carr's purpose—his good guys and gals are good; the bad are bad.

He does have more to say, though, about Clarence Darrow, who defends Libby in a trial filled with courtroom antics, tension, and (phew!) a long shot that pans out for the prosecution. Darrow emerges as a harbinger of Johnnie Cochran justice, in which the "victims and witnesses are put on trial instead of the defendants." Like any good historical novelist—given the setting, Jack Finney's *Time and Again* comes to mind—Carr sees the seeds and shadows of present conflicts in the past.

Cornelius Vanderbilt and Elizabeth Cady Stanton also make appearances, but none receives the treatment of Teddy Roosevelt, who buzzed energetically through *The Alienist* and whose reformist (and preachy, and hokey) zeal returns in *The Angel of Darkness*.



"This is great stuff. The criminal mind never ceases to amaze me!"

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In fact, Kreizler and his crew represent a cross section of New York City progressivism. Carr's heroes are Moore, your basic blue-blood; Cyrus, an African-American; Susan, an independent-minded woman; the Isaacson brothers, intellectual Jews; Taggart, the Five Points-escapee; Kreizler, an educated immigrant; and even El Niño, an oddly-named noble savage.

No surprise, then, that aside from gruesome criminals, this crew's nemeses also include fattened Tammany sachems and cops on the take. New York, it seems, would be a noble place if it weren't for that damned "Irish clan of Tammany hirelings." The street gang that the sleuths fight is made up of ugly "violent Irishmen," and even Cyrus's parents were killed by an Irish mob during the New York City Draft Riots, an event which firmly established the anti-Irish sentiment prevalent among progressive nineteenth-century New Yorkers.

The only thing more foolish than suggesting that Carr is some sort of bigot would be to gloss over Tammany's many crimes and misdemeanors. Still, there is a tradition of elitist disdain for Tammany Hall and its supporters (not to mention their children and grandchildren) that is steeped in religious, ethnic, and class suspicions, which—if history is his game—Carr should be more wary of.

None of which means all that much when it comes to Carr's ability to recreate a time and stage a morbid murder mystery. Like any big book, *The Angel of Darkness* could have used some pruning. But this (like the occasional contrivance and melodrama) doesn't detract from the book's merits. At last report, a film version of *The Alienist* was stalled out in Hollywood, which is a shame. Caleb Carr has mastered the craft of creating engrossing stories with horse-clopping, gaslight-era ambiance, foot-racing suspense, evil-bad-guy chills, and even a bit of historical contemplation. Hollywood should be so selective. □

Thomas Deignan *teaches English at Saint John's University and American studies at CUNY. He is also at work on a novel.*

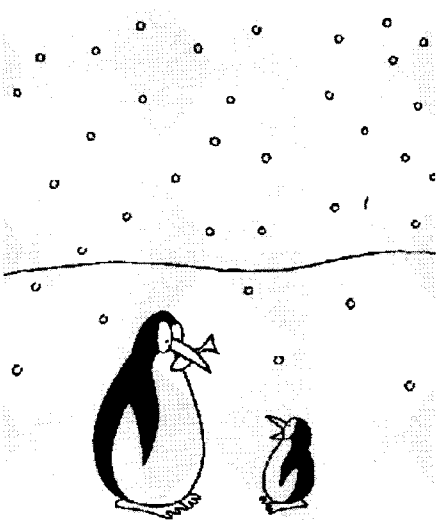
CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

concluded that it was up to the institution itself, not the church, to determine what it would be. More important, I believe that many American Catholic academics would take issue with Professor Conn's contention that "Catholic universities are *within* the church, indeed at its very heart" [emphasis his]. The various accrediting associations that have accredited such universities, not as religious institutions but as true universities, would undoubtedly be surprised to learn that they were now "within the church" and subject to the "extensive involvement" of the local bishop, after having been assured by those universities that they were institutionally autonomous.

It is precisely because there are such widely different, and in my opinion irreconcilable, views between the Roman Curia on the one hand and American Catholic academia on the other that I continue to believe that, in the final analysis, "nobody will budge." Although Professor Conn believes, as he has written so clearly for so many years, that American Catholic universities should recognize the legitimate authority of the bishops over their affairs, he does not appear to take issue with my ultimate conclusion that, in the end, they will not.

PAUL C. SAUNDERS



"You mean that's all we eat? Fish? All the time?"

More on McCarraher

Professor McCarraher's acerbic essay [September 12] on the lay revolution makes sense of my perplexity when asked to serve on a parish liturgy committee. I had assumed that my graduate work in theology would be relevant; it turned out that business courses would have been more helpful. The language and ideals extolled by the committee's lay professionals struck me as alien to a church setting.

I should like to add to McCarraher's sampling of the church's new consumer-ethos vocabulary by listing some of the words most bandied about in discussions of parish ministries. "Structure" (the new god to bow to); "micromanagement" (the new mortal sin); "conveners" (don't call people "directors," they might act that way); "teams" and "co-leaders" (as if anyone can play any position on the field). Karl Rahner has noted that when "everybody wants to do everything" in the church, the result is mediocrity. The suggestion that people in the pew must experience "ownership" (a telltale term, surely) of the liturgy strikes me as theologically misguided; does the creature ever "possess" what is utter gift from the Creator?

Our pastor's homily last summer on Mark's account of Jesus' commissioning his disciples took a surprising turn. After suggesting that we seem to lack today any basic missionary impulse, he added a new note: What we are slow to understand is that we *are* the culture that we are called to critique and evangelize. The message we are sent to deliver is a message we ourselves need to hear. Now that we lay experts, fluent in our corporate and commercial culture, have invited the consumer ethos into the very heart of our parishes, have we not lost our missionary stance *vis-à-vis* secular society, as well as our own capacity to hear the prophetic gospel message?

MICHAEL M. MATTHIESEN
Petaluma, Calif.

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Check the chancery

Re: "Starbucks Catholicism" [September 12, November 21]: In rural Iowa lay people are also increasingly enlisted to serve in churches, but not with any freedom to follow their own insights but rather subject to those of clerical archdiocesan planners, who are sometimes incredibly inept. An example is the effort in recent years to sell "stewardship" (tithing) to, of all people, Iowa farmers. And who are the lay people the planners engage to preach this good word? Lawyers. Politicians. Bankers. Insurance salesmen. The very people toward whom many farmers have bitter feeling—and with reason—and blame for their economic hardships. Do farmers believe them when they ascend church pulpits? I don't think so. Talk about shooting oneself in the foot!

Starbucks Catholicism doesn't sell in Iowa.

SYLVESTER L. STEFFEN
New Hampton, Iowa

Private goes public

Agree or disagree, I always enjoy reading Sidney Callahan's columns. This time ["Lights! Camera! Tears!" October 24] I agree, but want to offer an elaboration.

True to her calling as a psychologist, Callahan focuses her thoughts about the very public response to the death of Princess Diana on the individual and his or her responsibility for controlling emotional expression. I agree that responsibility and balance are best realized by people themselves. But as an anthropologist I couldn't help thinking that Callahan missed an important part of the problem. It's not simply an issue of measuring the authenticity of grief by whether it's expressed in the marketplace; it's also that the once-clear lines between public and private space are no longer there. Surely these altered contexts help explain what we saw in the mourning over Diana's death.

Thus, the "judicious obtuseness" urged on physicians by William Osler makes sense in the context of a professional relationship; it would be monstrous, though, if he were recommending such restraint within his own family. It is precisely that line between public and private that has been obscured in the case of Diana—and is continually blurred in the media attention to celebrity. Even without a television, I know more about Diana's sex life than I do about some of my wilder cousins. Yet such knowledge can't help conferring a kind of familial intimacy, however bogus—in the case of people who, like Diana, would otherwise mean very little to me. The mourning for Diana would not appear so overblown were it contained within a single room, where twenty or forty people are expressing their grief in a funeral involving family and friends.

I agree with Callahan that there was something that didn't feel right about these events, and I absolutely

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agree that a reordering of such displays can only grow out of people's getting a personal grip on things. But rather than seeing this as a kind of mass loss of control, a contagion of emotions, I see the diagnosis having to do with the media and the marketplace infiltrating and turning to their advantage what were once markers of the private, intimate, and familial. Diana's mourners responded out of an altered context of intimacy, and it is only by understanding this that we can recalibrate our emotional displays.

TOM FRICKE
Ann Arbor, Mich.

A special charism?

Lawrence J. Gillis's splendid Last Word, "Forgive Me, Solicitor" [September 26], elicited this response from my friend and attorney (a former president of the Florida Bar Association): "I guess I've handled a hundred criminal cases in my forty-year career, and I don't remember having any of them confess or offer to confess. If Mr. Gillis has everyone confessing, he is especially endowed."

Also, belated thanks to Sean Callery for his explicit, positive review [August 15] of the Pete Hamill novel, *Snow in August*. On the other hand, I shouldn't have read the review because it opens with the word-for-word last paragraph of the book, thereby removing the sting and mystery of the work. Still, *shalom*!

EDWARD F. HAYES
Orlando, Fla.

Respect for 'Respect'

I found myself reading Alane Salierno Mason's moving essay "Respect: An Italian-American Story" [October 10] for the second time today. It mirrors both feelings and observations I had growing up in a neighborhood that was then predominantly Italian too.

My rereading reinforced my intention to obtain the anthology that includes it. Alas, the *Commonweal* citation lists the publisher and title of the anthology but not the author/editor. The full information may help facilitate my search in the local bookstores.

FRANK S. DE LUCIA
San Pedro, Calif.

From the editors: Beyond the Godfather (University Press of New England, $36, 320 pp.) was edited by A. Stephen Ciongoli and Jay Parini.

Spirit lacking

In his review [October 10] of "Nothing Sacred," Frank McConnell's choice of quotes—from a friend, "anyone who thinks that religious life isn't melancholy doesn't know much about religious life," from Karl Rahner on what it is to be religious, "to believe that it is meaningful for a human being to speak into the endless desert of God's silence," and from Graham Greene's disdainful reference to "the habit of piety"—reveals a mindset that shows little evidence of the fire of the Holy Spirit. Does faith have something to do with that? I believe it does!

DONNA McNAMARA
Metairie, La.

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GEORGE BAILEY'S SECRET LIFE

Patrick J. Deneen

Thanks to countless television reruns each holiday season, *It's a Wonderful Life* has become a permanent feature of our Christmas celebration. Frank Capra's delightful film features Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, an Everyman who saves his small town from an evil Scrooge. As it happens, George Bailey only grudgingly comes to realize the value of his own life by witnessing, thanks to the interventions of an angel, what terrors might have occurred had he never lived.

Bailey very much represents all that is good and decent about the American dream. Above all, he is a family man beloved by his community. Yet, *It's a Wonderful Life* captures the dark side of America as well. No, it's not simply the Scrooge-like banker Mr. Potter. Rather, George Bailey himself—Bailey the optimist, the adventurer, the builder, the man who craves nothing else but to get out of Bedford Falls and remake the world—exhibits a little-remarked-upon dark side. As we watch *It's a Wonderful Life* this year, I'd like to suggest that we pay more attention to what the vindication of George Bailey's life actually entails. For Bailey, in fact, destroys the town that saves him in the end.

The movie's first scene pictures an idyllic Bedford Falls covered in freshly fallen snow, people strolling on sidewalks, a few cars meandering, healthy storefronts comfortably framing tree-lined streets. It is an America long dead: displaced first by Woolworth's, then K-Mart, then Wal-Mart; mercilessly restructured to serve the automobile; drained of life by uniform architecture, interstate highways, and the ever-expanding suburbs. We like this movie because it portrays Mr. Gower's drug store as a place to meet neighbors over an ice cream, not merely a place where one is treated as a faceless consumer buying an endless variety of pain-killers. We like this movie because, like "Cheers," Martini's bar is a place where everybody knows our name.

But young George Bailey hates this town. He wants to escape its limiting clutches, ideally to visit distant and exotic lands. As he grows up, his ambitions change: he wants "to build things, design new buildings, plan modern cities." The modern city of Bailey's dreams is contrasted to the confinements of Bedford Falls: Bailey's future is to be open, fast, glittering, kaleidoscopic. George craves "to shake off the dust of this crummy little town" to build "airfields, skyscrapers one hundred stories tall, bridges a mile long...."

Bailey embodies the energy and vision of postwar America. Like the nation as a whole, Bailey is eager to uproot nature and to alter the landscape, to re-engineer life for mobility and swiftness. Bailey's brave new world is unencumbered by permanence and not confined to a merely human scale.

Our hero's dreams are famously thwarted by fate and accident: he ends up managing the family Building and Loan. Yet his grandiose designs are not forgotten. Rather, they are channeled into the only avenue available: Bailey remakes Bedford Falls. His motives are noble: by creating "Bailey Park," a modern subdivision of single-family houses, he allows hundreds of families to escape the greedy and malignant clutches of Mr. Potter. But is Bailey's subdivision worthy of admiration in itself? Potter is evil, yes, but that does not necessarily make Bailey's actions laudable.

In truth, Bailey Park is little more than an antiseptic suburban sprawl, especially when compared to the organic unity of Bedford Falls. Bedford Falls has an intimate town center, and blocks of houses with front porches where people sit and greet their neighbors. It is a town with a deep sense of place and history. When George's car crashes into a tree, the owner berates him: "My great-grandfather planted this tree." He is the fourth generation to live in his house.

In Bailey Park all the trees have been plowed under to make room for wide streets, large yards, and garages. In contrast to Bedford Falls, the subdivision is empty, almost devoid of human presence. Residents are presumably hidden behind the unwelcoming doors of their modern houses or relaxing on their back yard patios. There are no front porches in Bailey Park—life is led in private, not in the intermediate public spaces that link the street to the home. One doubts that anyone will live in these houses for four generations, much less one.

Toward the end of the film we learn something more sinister. Bailey Park, it is revealed during George's time travels with the angel Clarence, has been built atop the old town cemetery. Not only does George raze trees and transform landscapes, but he commits an unspeakable sacrilege: He obliterates a sacred symbol of our connection with the past. Bailey's well-intentioned vision of a modern America eliminates our links with our forebears, covers up the evidence of death, supplies us with private retreats of social isolation, and all at the expense of a living, intimate community.

We tend not to notice these aspects of *It's a Wonderful Life*, partly because Bailey is a decent man, and we're always rooting for him against Mr. Potter. Moreover, we don't notice George's animus toward the town that sustained him, I think, because we find nothing aberrant about his vision: after all, it is largely our own vision. However, George Bailey's story should serve not only as a Christmas treat, but also as a reminder of what modern prosperity seemingly insists on depriving us. □

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Mission to North America

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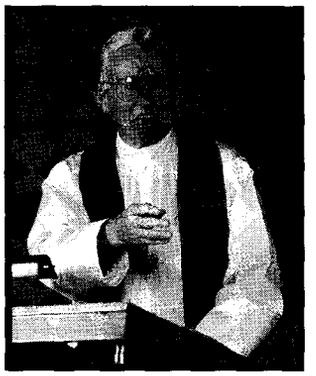

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